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DE RUEHSI #1131/01 1701342  
ZNY CCCCC ZZH  
O 191342Z JUN 09  
FM AMEMBASSY TBILISI  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1770  
INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 001131

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/16/2019

TAGS: PGOV PREL PREF MOPS KBTS RU GG

SUBJECT: GEORGIA: RUSSIA KEY TOPIC IN ABKHAZ POLITICS

REF: A. TBILISI 1035  
    1B. TBILISI 1034

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT FOR REASONS 1.4 B AND D

¶1. (C) Summary and comment. In seeming contradiction to recent reports of concern in Abkhazia about Russian influence (ref A), UNOMIG officials, de facto authorities, opposition journalists, and NGOs in Abkhazia told visiting poloff that Abkhaz politicians are trying to out-do each other to show they are the most pro-Russian. However, sources also noted a growing wariness among Abkhaz that Russian interests in Abkhazia should be moderated. One long-term observer of Abkhazia said that even these mild statements of apprehension, when made to a U.S. official, indicate there is real concern. Several opposition candidates seem to be emerging, but no one has yet announced intentions to run in the December "presidential" elections. NGOs in Abkhazia also reported on self-proclaimed progress in democratic reforms. De facto "vice foreign minister" Maxim Gundjia commented on plans and hopes for Abkhaz economic development. It was clear that no one in Abkhazia - de facto authorities, opposition leaders or NGO representatives - was willing to concede to poloff or publicly any anti-Russian sentiment, possibly for fear of Russia response. The fact that they went as far as telling poloff that they wanted to ensure Abkhaz interests were considered a priority in Abkhazia over Russian interests is an indication that there is likely more suspicion and worry over Russian actions in Abkhazia than they were willing to admit. Whatever the sentiment is towards Russia among the Abkhaz - anti-Russia, pro-Russia, or ambivalent - Russia plays a significant role in their discussion of their present and future situation. End summary and comment.

ANTI-RUSSIA OR PRO-RUSSIA?

¶2. (C) During meetings in Sukhumi, UNOMIG officials, opposition-leaning journalists, and de facto Abkhaz authorities told visiting poloff that opposition leaders and de facto authorities continue to be pro-Russia. According to UNOMIG officials, leaders are trying to outdo each other in their support for Russia. According to opposition-leaning journalists, the majority of people do not think that Russia has too much control over Abkhazia. However, they noted that the Abkhaz have no illusions about Russia and understand that Russia wants to protect its own strategic interests in Abkhazia. All interlocutors admitted that there is a wariness about allowing Abkhaz and Russian interests to become too intertwined, and emphasized the importance of keeping Abkhaz interests above Russian interests. According to these same sources, people generally appreciate Russian economic and political support and understand that they have to rely on Russia now in order to maintain independence. However, NGOs representatives and de facto "vice foreign minister" Maxim Gundjia stated emphatically that they would welcome assistance from the West, and without this assistance, it will be difficult for Abkhazia to escape the influence of Russia. A western scholar who has been conducting civil society dialogue in Abkhazia for 30 years told poloffs that on a June 10-17 trip to Abkhazia she

observed a definite increase in guardedness among the Abkhaz towards Russia. She expressed surprised that NGOs and de facto authorities expressed as much concern as they did, and took this admission to a U.S. diplomat as a sure sign of a growing anti-Russian sentiment.

#### DECEMBER "PRESIDENTIAL" ELECTIONS

¶13. (C) Elections for a new Abkhaz "president" are scheduled to take place in mid-December. As of yet, no one, including Bagapsh, has announced plans to run. However, most people assume that Bagapsh, former de-facto "vice-president" Raul Khajimba, and shady businessman Beslan Butba will likely run for the position. UNOMIG officials and opposition-leaning journalists emphasized to poloff that while Bagapsh will likely be the winner, the Abkhaz are unpredictable, so no one will really know the outcome until it happens. The success or failure of current economic projects, such as the railway and foreign investment (ref A), will play a role in determining the winner, as will the financial resources of the candidates. Khajimba is considered to have the least financial resources available.

#### WHAT DOES THE OPPOSITION STAND FOR?

¶14. (C) UN officials, de facto authorities, and NGO representatives told poloff that while there is a nascent opposition in Abkhazia, none of the leaders' positions differ much from either each other or the de facto authorities. The opposition is criticized for only condemning the de facto authorities, but not presenting any substantive alternative proposals of their own. Those with whom poloff spoke in

TBILISI 00001131 002 OF 002

Abhazia, noted that the opposition is not united and constantly contradicts each other.

#### DEMOCRATIC REFORMS - PROGRESS MADE IN A HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT

¶15. (C) Representatives from the Center for Humanitarian Development (CHD), an NGO in Sukhumi, talked with poloff on the state of democratic reforms in Abkhazia. CHD representatives told poloff that democratic institutions are developing in Abkhazia in a particularly unfriendly environment, with the West and Georgia working against Abkhazia, and Russia not caring about democratic reforms. According to the representative, since Russia and Nicaragua recognized Abkhaz independence, Abkhazia has gained confidence in its security situation and now feels that it can be more bold in instituting reforms and challenging the de facto authorities. However, the representative was not able to articulate to poloff any specific gains made in democratic reforms.

#### THE STATE OF FREE MEDIA

¶16. (C) The CHD representative outlined what she considered to be Abkhaz successes in free media. The representative elaborated that CHD had lobbied for a law, that has since passed the de facto "parliament," on increasing access to public information. The representative admitted that the de facto authorities do pressure journalists, but said that journalists exaggerate this harassment. UNOMIG officials, CHD representatives and journalists described to poloff one incident of harassment in June, in which the two leading opposition papers were prohibited from using the local printing house. They do not have the in-house resources to print the papers, and they are also restricted from sending the paper to Russia for printing, so this effectively shut them down. While the de facto authorities posited that this was strictly a business decision by the management of the printing house, most others believed that this case did involve some level of pressure by the de facto authorities on the printing house.

¶17. (C) Another recent incident involves Butba's television

channel, which is currently only broadcast in Sukhumi. He sought permission from the de facto authorities to broadcast across all of Abkhazia, but they denied this request. Journalists also reported to poloff that they are targets of other forms of direct pressure from de facto authorities, including the blocking of publication of certain articles the authorities deem inappropriate. Furthermore, in Abkhazia people only have access to Russian and Abkhaz news sources, and while BBC is occasionally broadcast, it is not translated into either Russian or the Abkhaz language.

#### THE SINGAPORE MODEL

¶8. (C) Gundjia told poloff that economic development in Abkhazia was the de facto authorities' number one priority, acknowledging that widespread international political recognition could take 20 years or more. He said Abkhazia is pursuing the "Singapore Model," defined by Gundjia as a free economic zone with a transparent and open business environment. He expressed frustration that non-recognition by most of the international community has prevented Abkhazia from being transparent, something he argued it very much aspires to. He stated that Abkhazia wants to attract more tourists, Russian and others, and thinks opening clothing stores would help. (Note: This is undoubtedly a reference to the recent announcement and then quick rescinding of the announcement that Bennetton would be opening a store in Sukhumi - ref B. End note.) Gundjia said Abkhazia would welcome Georgian and Western business and tourism, which would benefit everyone. However, he emphatically stated that Owould benefit everyone. However, he emphatically stated that time cannot be turned back, and while Abkhazia will never again be part of Georgia, he welcomed a future of normal relations with Georgia as a neighbor.

TEFFT